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The Value of Knowledge and Relationships

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Doug Bowen-Bailey¹

Digiterp Communications

The 2016 CIT Conference in Lexington, Kentucky, has just come to a close and the editors of the *IJIE* asked for some highlights in light of consideration of the value of travel to attend conferences. (As I drove 16 hours back to my home in Minnesota, I had some time to ponder these questions.) Here are some of my reflections.

In our data-driven society, value is often seen in terms of quantifiable amounts. So I offer some of the numbers related to our conference:

- More than 300 people attended the pre-conference session, conference, or both.
- More than 50 people volunteered to help organize and support the running of the conference.
- 4 plenary sessions
- 36 workshop sessions
- 11 poster presentations

Yet for those who attend conferences, I think the real benefits are qualitative in nature and not so easily described with numbers. So, here are some more qualitative themes.

Knowledge: Research, Learn and Collaborate were three aspects of this year's conference theme. Conference participants had the opportunity to learn from the research and work of a tremendous cohort of presenters from around the globe. Christian Rathmann opened the conference with presentation on current trends in interpreting education, drawing on his experiences as an educator and researcher in Germany. Amy Williamson, a PhD candidate at Gallaudet University, shared her research on heritage learners of sign language and their position in our field. David Quinto-Pozos from the University of Texas shared his research on the state of trilingual interpreter education focused on ASL, English and Spanish. Finally, Brandon Arthur, who started StreetLeverage, shared his thoughts on the ways that interpreter educators play a critical and creative role in the overall profession of interpreting.

These plenary sessions are just the tip of the iceberg for research and teaching practice that was shared. As a co-chair for registration, I was not actually able to attend many of the sessions myself, but I saw many conversations and comments about the quality of workshops and ideas.

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The one session I did attend, on facilitating “courageous conversations” in the classroom, was held on a Thursday evening. Because it was after a break for the evening meal, the presenters, Risa Shaw and Mary Thumann, did not expect to have a large audience. However, the room was full as they shared ways that they address issues related to social justice and oppression in the context of interpreting education. In fact, even after the 8:30 pm end time, attendees lingered in small group discussions continuing on consideration of the topics that had been presented.

Networking: Amy Williamson, in her plenary presentation, touched on the importance of relationships between interpreters and the communities they served. Conferences give people the opportunity to practice nurturing these relationships. Richard Laurion, who works at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota, shared these thoughts:

[Networking] is a hard reason to convince administrators and bosses because they see it as fluff-time. However, our networking is far from superfluous - our field is young and this is a way we share teaching strategies and improve our work.

In addition to our field being young, interpreter education (particularly for sign language interpreters) must also contend with being a low-incidence field. There are not that many programs and we are spread out across the country, so having a chance to come together and engage in discussion with other educators with similar challenges and concerns is vital.

Inspiration: Finally, conferences provide inspiration and energy to try new practices to take our teaching and mentoring to new levels. Whether it is learning about new apps that can be incorporated in the classroom to engage students, new linguistic research about how head nods are used in ASL, or recent research undertaken by PhD students, these fresh perspectives have the potential to infuse energy into our own teaching and interpreting practice.

At CIT, this is augmented by the international flavor of the conference. This year, a contingent of educators came from Japan. So, in many of the workshops, participants were able to see a team working to interpret from ASL into Japanese Sign Language. We also had presentations from educators from Scotland, Germany, and Canada. So although the focus of the conference is on education for ASL–English interpreters in the United States, the conference serves as an important reminder that we are connected to other interpreter educators around the globe, in both spoken and signed languages.

Making Our Case

On my final day at the conference, I had a conversation with a colleague who has recently retired from teaching. She asked for my perspective on this conference compared to previous ones. Our attendance numbers were down. In conversations with me during the registration process, some people reported that in the current economic environment, academic institutions are more hesitant to support travel to conferences, particularly ones that go out of state. We are also in the situation where the federal grant which supported the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC) is now complete, and the new grant replacing it is not in effect. This grant has supported the attendance of many educators in the past, so this also had an effect.

What it made me consider, though, is that in the midst of the numbers games of finances in educational institutions, it is important for us as educators to be able to articulate the ways that attending conferences bring value to our work in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Our administrators may want to see the numbers, but it is the knowledge and networking that truly inspire us to move forward on our professional paths.